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Hong Kong Identity and Democratic Values

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By Sebastian Veg

When Peking University Professor Kong Qingdong's diatribe on Hongkongers and their lingering colonial infatuation swept over the Internet in late January, the widespread and growing uneasiness about mainland Chinese in Hong Kong suddenly had a face. Triggered by a viral video of a Hongkonger telling off a mainland family in the subway because their daughter was eating dry instant noodles, Kong's interview sparked a wave of predictable but nonetheless justified outrage in Hong Kong. It took place against the background of the annual mainland shopping spree over Chinese New Year (in a previous episode, Dolce and Gabbana staff in Tsim Sha Tsui [sparked protests](#) by telling passers-by that only mainlanders were allowed to take pictures of the shop) as well as growingly acrimonious debates over mainland women giving birth in the emergency rooms of Hong Kong hospitals in order to secure permanent residency for their children, and over Guangdong-registered vehicles' right to drive freely in Hong Kong. It was followed by a counter-campaign in Apple Daily and other Hong Kong newspapers depicting mainlanders as locusts looting Hong Kong, pushing up property prices and free-riding on the—albeit minimal—welfare provided by the SAR government.

Professor Kong, in a true cadre-style tirade with a thin varnish of May Fourth anti-colonialism, referred to Lu Xun's 1927 critique of colonial Hong Kong and his denunciation of *xizai* 西崽, the fake-foreign devils populating Shanghai's concessions, chastised by Lu Xun for being “dogs to the foreigners but wolves to their fellow Chinese.” He conceded that Hong Kong had some advantages, “for example the legal system” or *fazhi* 法制, but, he hastened to add, this was only necessary because Hongkongers' *suzhi* 素質, or “human quality” was so low. In China, he went on, there is no need for the rule of law because social harmony is achieved by raising the people's moral qualities, an echo of teachings of his 73th generation forefather, Confucius. *Suzhi* is one of the terms popularized by the CCP that has come to feel natural on the mainland (the more traditional term would be *pinzhi* 品質, or “moral fibre”) and served to legitimize the quasi-apartheid system instituted by Mao and based on the distinction between urban and rural residence permits (*hukou*). In this logic, urban residents are commonly associated with high *suzhi*, as opposed to peasants and—according to Kong—Hongkongers. Interestingly, and regrettably, many Hong Kongers have phrased their resistance to the mainlanders' “invasion” in very similar terms. The anti-“locust” and anti-pregnant mother campaign, vocally relayed by the local democrats, has not focused on the values that make Hong Kong unique and different from China, but on the insufficiently “civilized” habits of mainlanders.

While a [December poll](#) suggested that the feeling of Chinese identity among Hong Kong citizens was at an all-time low (immediately provoking a furious denial on the private blog of a Central liaison office employee who protested that the questions had been asked in an “unscientific” way: as Hong Kong is not a country, it has no identity attached to it), there has been little reflection about what makes the current waves of immigration from China different from the many previous ones that were, over time, fused into the distinctive culture that has made Hong

Kong unique. Not all the people leaving Guangdong or Shanghai throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were, after all, political refugees; many were simply relatives from across the border hoping for a better life. Yet it seems that Hong Kong is now more apprehensive about losing its difference. The question is what exactly that difference is. Formulating it in the discourse of *suzhi* means that mainlanders are derided for failing to form orderly queues, for speaking loudly in public places, and for flouting established social rules, like eating or drinking in the MTR. Rarely in this debate have Hong Kong's distinctive values been characterized by critics of mainland presence as "democratic," based on freedom of expression, mutual respect and equality not only before the law but also in social interactions. The ever observant Chinese political commentator Chang Ping, whose work-visa application to Hong Kong has been placed indefinitely on hold by the SAR government, noted in the *South China Morning Post* op-ed "Brothers in arms" that what Hongkongers might legitimately resent is not the presence of mainlanders in Hong Kong as much as what we might call the "cadre culture" that characterizes many of the compulsive Chinese shoppers on the New Year spree: a type of behavior by a very specific type of person underlining that they are powerful and somehow above the law—a type of behavior resented by many ordinary citizens on the mainland. But Hong Kong's democrats in particular have failed to provide any kind of political reading of the population's uneasiness: instead they have indulged in populist escalation, calling to revise the Basic Law to deprive Hong Kong-born children of mainland mothers of the right to permanent residency. The democrats are often criticized for having no political program beyond democracy, but perhaps it would be more exact to say that their understanding of democracy oftentimes seems limited to an orderly queue of people lining up—in front of a ballot box they may never reach.

More generally, fifteen years after the handover, the relationship between China and Hong Kong is as complex as ever. The Dengist calculation, according to which the "decolonization of minds," as enforced through "patriotic education," would produce "patriotic" citizens (i.e. Beijing loyalists) in Hong Kong and therefore lay the foundation for "safe" universal suffrage, has not translated into reality. On the contrary, it has produced a group of young, vocal anti-Beijing activists, who seem to speak for the entire post-80s generation, aggravated by rising housing prices and growing social inequality which the handover has entailed. In the larger picture, however, this group remains a minority, squeezed between a super-elite of tycoons and businessmen with interests in China, and a large working class, steadily growing by the effect of immigration from the mainland, which has no particular feeling of cultural identity in Hong Kong. As it already did in colonial times, this working class sees itself to a strong extent as part of a larger Cantonese culture, totally disconnected from the lifestyle of the English-speaking elite. The democrats try to cater to this part of the population by framing the issue of mainlanders in Hong Kong in populist terms ("they will take your hospital spots"), while seeming to ignore that this part of the population massively votes for the pro-Beijing DAB (Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong). Contrary to what has happened in Taiwan, however, the sense of a Hong Kong identity that is both local and democratic has little or no grassroots base in the larger population. Those commentators who have recently engaged in colonial nostalgia might do well to remember that this division of society is exactly the product of the colonial regime.

This is the context in which the two elections of 2012, the chief executive on March 25 and the LegCo elections in September, will take place. Interestingly, the profiles of the three candidates competing for Chief Executive seem to tally almost exactly with the three social groups outlined

above. Henry Tang represents the pro-Beijing elite of tycoons and businessmen; Albert Ho, the pan-democrat with no chance of winning, the squeezed middle class; and Leung Chun-ying the pro-Beijing populist who scares the tycoons, the loosely pro-Chinese working class. In this context, in which a political definition of democracy seem to have largely disappeared from the values deemed to define Hong Kong, and even from the entire campaign debate, one may wonder, with a pinch of nostalgia, whether “Hong Kong identity” has not simply become a stand-in for what in another context has been called the *déjà disparu*—Hong Kong’s democratic culture.

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